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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the differences between the one-child family and the family with more than one child in terms of the effects or possible effects on the child. Longitudinal studies of 200 children being followed from birth through age 5 (one-third of whom are only children, two-thirds, second children, were used as a data base, along with a less systematically collected data base on only children and their parents and a comparison group of non-only families. Certain psychodynamic features that seemed to relate to the composition and structure of the only child family were identified. These included: (1) increased parental focus on the only child, resulting in greater mutual dependence; (2) heightened ambivalence between parent and child generated by their emotional and physical closeness; (3) multiple parent roles, since parent often acts as a substitute for the absent sibling; (4) adult-like adjustment (the child has to adjust to an adult-oriented household); (5) identification with parents (the models that parents provide are very difficult for any child to identify with successfully, so the only child often feels inadequate); (6) values (emphasizing respects for individuality and independence rather than sharing and cooperation) which do not necessarily facilitate his getting along with other children; (7) parental expectations which encourage cognitive and intellectual independence but not necessarily emotional independence; (8) recipient of parental problems (the only child is much more at the mercy of what happens within the family); (9) power structure, which can often result in two-against-one situations. (MS)

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The Dynamics of the One Child Family: Socialization Implications.*

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Since the family is recognized as one of the most salient cocializing agents for the child, its size, composition and structure have been regarded as important elements in determining child socialization patterns and ultimately the developmental outcome of the child. The family milieu of the only child is uniquely a small, circumscribed and closely bound family unit. Its size and structural features seem to affect certain interactions, relationships, attitudes and values. Using as a data base, longitudinal studies of 200 children who are being followed from birth through the first five y rs of life, one third of whom are only children and two thirds of whom are second children, and a less systematically collected data base on only children and their parents, and a comparison group of non-only families, I have identified certain psychodynamic features that seem to be related to the composition and structure of the only child family.

In this presentation I shall briefly note some of those family features which seem to me important because from a theoretical

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perspective, they presage certain developmental characteristics of the only child. With research data on the only child limited and incomplete, some of these features in the only child family may have the unfortunate tendency of promoting the stereotypes that have so long plagued the only child. It is tempting, but often erroneous, to jump to conclusions about the child from the socialization process to which he is exposed. However, acknowledging this danger, I think data on the socialization experiences and relationships of the child can be of research value, for they can point to areas and times in development where characteristics, unique to a child growing up as an only, are likely to be found.

Parental Focus on the Only Child.

Probably the most important single feature distinguishing the only child's socialization is that he alone absorbs parental interest and attention. This begins with the early attachment or bonding about which so much has been written in the child development literature (1) and which sets into motion dependency between mother and child, the parent's emotional and intellectual investment in the child that encourages pride in his maturation, concern for his needs, and the mutual affectional reciprocity that has such important implications for the later security and stability of the child. In the only child family, the strong feelings of dependency that grow out of this developmental attachment phenomenon have no "natural" dilution as they do when a second child is born. Rather, parent and child remain closely invested in each other.

Merely the fact that the parent has more time to spend with the only child encourages interest in his every experience, and such investment is even heightened when parents anticipate that their first child will be their one and only. They value the opportunity to know this one child intimately, and to experience what they can of parenthood through their child. They also become sensitive to the impact they as parents have in shaping the child's growth, for especially as they see that their stimulation does facilitate his development in the early years, parents perceive themselves as responsible for what happens to the child.

Another powerful mechanism for tying-in parent to child stems from the parent's need to be a good parent. There is an expectation among only child parents that since they have only one child they should be more effective parents than their friends or neighbors who are inevitable frazzled and harried by a brood,each with competing demands and needs. In our child development studies (2) which are conducted on children growing up in homes representative of many of the pluralistic family settings now extant in the United States, we have found that the needs of the infant become the primary determinant of how the parent (usually the mother) devotes her time, despite any personal conflicts about this that stem from her own plans for herself. In this vein, the only child parent feels he should give his only child his all in order to provide

this one child the maximum start in life. This attitude sometimes leads to a wise, understanding, responsive parenting; sometimes, to overportectiveness; sometimes to a demanding and perfectionistic parenting, the nature of the parenting - a function of the parent's own level of adjustment than anything else. However, importantly, this need to be a good parent ties parent to child in a strong mutually dependent way that is not invariably positive or without conflict, as the parent often expects it to be.

Ambivalence. One of the dramatic features of the parent/child relationship is the heightened ambivalence between parent and child that is generated by their emotional and physical closeness. Ambivalent feelings are part of the normal growing up process, but become exacerbated in the small one-child family where so many of both parent and child's satisfactions, frustrations, and disappointments rest on the responsiveness of each other. A parent highly involved in his child's life becomes overly sensitized to the child's every reaction. When the child fails to meet expectations, disappointment is keen, and hostility toward the child difficult to keep in check. Similarly, the child becomes sensitized to his parent's feelings and attitudes about him, and to their expectations for him. The "snail's feelers" that parent and child develop towards each other, can bring powerful emotions into play, and can encourage a level of conflict in the household that is particularly dismaying to the parent who, not understanding these dynamics in his "intimate" family, perceives himself as failing in the very role in which he wants to be most effective.

Multiple Parent Roles. In the socialization process of the only child, parent is more than just parent. He is called upon to play many roles, having to take the place of the absent sibling. The only child tends to project onto the parents those feelings, attitudes, and interactions that children with brothers or sisters customarily project on to another sibling. In his activities, he will expect the parent to be variously playmate, companion, confidante, and ally, as well as parent, authority figure, super ego. This diversity of roles into which a child casts the parent at times, shifts herewith -- often without much forewarning, making the most judiciously planned parent-child contacts sometimes go astray. Therefore rivalry, often thought one of the banes of larger families, is not without its counterpart in the one-child family, with a parent being placed in the sibling role. (Friends also function psychologically as brothers and sisters for the only child).

Adult-Like Adjustment. One of the demands unique to the one-family household is that the child become socialized early and rapidly. He like all first children, comes into an adult household, oriented around adult activities, interests, and friends. With only one child, parents expect the child to adjust to their life style, rather than orienting their own lives around the child. In fact my less systematically collected data suggest that parents' social, personal, and economic lives change very little with the advent of one child as compared to households that have two or three. By contrast, households with at least two children are rated child-than-

adult oriented by train home observers. The need to adapt to an adult household in order to make the family function smoothly facilitates the development of certain competencies an only child: he verbalizes early, develops interests in games adults can share, shows social poise with adults, and has experiences that grow out of his family's non-child-oriented patterns of living that make his background quite different from those of peers.

Identification. That the only child becomes like his parents in interests and behavior is not surprising, since this is the way identification proceeds developmentally. However, the rather unique demand of maturing, or perhaps more correctly, pseudo-maturing rapidly, in order to adapt to his adult household has some other repercussions for psychological growth: for one, the models the parent provides are very difficult for any child to identify with successfully, so that the only child often feels inadequate to the standards set for him (3). Such feelings of low self-esteem and doubts about his competencies are particularly interesting, in the light of the quite unusual linguistic and academic skills and interests many only children show (4). Another spin-off are social difficulties with age-mates, for adult-like interests and skills, and little experience within the family of the natural give-and-take of children, do not prepare him readily for the social milieu outside the home.

Values. The value of the one child family also do not necessarily facilitate his getting along with other children. A small, rather than

large family, respects individuality, the achievement of self fulfilling aims, sets personal goals, is oriented toward maximizing the creative potential of each member (5). These values are quite different from the loyalty to the group, cooperation, task-sharing, group decision-making valued by the larger family. There is also a premium placed on independencies in a small family, but although parents cherish this for themselves, their personal investment in the child makes them more ambivalent about his own quest for independence.

Parental Expectations. Therefore the job of becoming emotionally independent for the only child is one that seems to be more conflictful than for children of other birth orders. This is not true in regard to cognitive or intellectual independence, however. The fact that studies point to the great achievement among onlies historically in intellectual and cognitive areas, shows how supportive the role of parent aspirations and expectations is for the stimulation and intellectual encouragement they give the child (6). In being models in their own achievement, or more frequently, frustrated in the level to which their own achievements have risen, they tend to place pressure for achievement on the only child.

Recipient of Parental Problems. Being the sole recipient of the parents' aspirations, expectations, values and ambitions, is not an unmixed blessing for the only child. It has its growth-promoting value in facilitating the kind of strong, consistent nurturning that can provide a solid emotional base for later life. However, this idealized home base is not always forthcoming, for

like other parents, only child parents can themselves be maladjusted and disturbed, so that the only child may become the sole recipient of his parents' neuroses.

In the larger family, both the strengths of the parents and their limitations have a tendency to be shared by all the children. One child may be more sensitive to one parent's personality problems than another, but even if one in a family is more receptive to difficulties or personality traits, he has allies, or supports as he needs them in his siblings. By contrast, the only child is left to his own devices with a pathological parent. He has no age mates in the family among whom the effects of parental difficulties might be distributed, or to whom he might turn for support under difficult circumstances. Therefore, the only child is much more at the mercy of what happens within the family so far as his own personality development is concerned. In the only family, like in other families, parental influences are generally not all good nor all bad; however , it is the powerless position in which the child finds himself to which I am drawing attention.

Power structure in the only child family. This brings me to the somewhat unique power structure in the one-child family. The power play in the nuclear one-child family seems to derive from the fact that by its very nature the only child family lives out the "eternal triangle." This "two-against-one" situation of the triangle, about which so much has been written in the psychodynamic

literature, is acted out constantly in the family of the only child. The threesome arrangement is very conducive to having two always lined up against one: sometimes parent versus child; sometimes one parent and child versus other parent. The particulars are less important than the potential for manipulation that resides in this family composition. These manipulatory tendencies arise early and make for some knotty disciplinary situations. It is hard for a parent to be consistent or to set appropriate limits when he recognizes that the child is constantly at a disadvantage in holding his own against his parents. It is even harder when a parent sees the child ingeniously exploiting this supposed disadvantage.

As the only child becomes older the complications that come from working out the normal developmental conflicts that have been identified as Oedipal seem to be exacerbated merely because the composition of the only child family is in fact a triangle. It seems especially difficult for only-child parents not to emotionally abuse the child in working out their own personal marital situations, or not to fall prey to the child's psycho-sexual or emotional attempts at exploitation as he tries to find ways to resolve his normal developmental conflicts.

Let me briefly note here (although it is a point worth far more attention) that in the social relationship and sexual areas of development, the normal opportunities for early exploration, curiosity, and casual learning from other siblings do not occur spontaneously in the one child family. It becomes a parental

task to "arrange" for these, a situation which often seduces the parent into acting as substitute. As the parent plays diverse roles with the child in order to meet his developmental needs, it is very conducive to him to try to become an age-mate substitute -- and not always easy to let "normal others" intrude. The socialization process of his child has been very meaningful to the parent, so that he can be threatened (for all his intellectual sophistication) by the socialization experiences provided by others - a predicament that does not make psychosocial and emotional growing up an easy experience for the only child.

Summary. The facets of the parent-child relationship that I have selected for brief mention need detail and further elaboration to fully describe the ways in which the socialization process for the only child differs from that of a second, third, or fourth order child. There are aspects of his socialization too which do not involve the parent relationship directly - the child's performance in the school situation, his personal relationships outside the home, some of his fears and anxieties, which also should be singled out for examination if one were to describe more thoroughly what happens to the child who resides in the one-family milieu.

If indeed further research bears out some of the aspects in developmental outcome that have been suggested by the minimal research done thus far -- and by the stereotypes, because I think no one believes stereotypes are completely accidental or without some rationale, however erroneously and misguidedly applied -- then certainly the socialization process of the only child will

demand much greater scientific attention that is has drawn up till now. However, I think that even at this early point in our research efforts it may be very desirable to enlarge our strategies to see how we might effectively utilize socialization data to obtain clues as to the areas in which to look for outcome characteristics of the only child that may be singularly definitive of his family status.

Socialization data too can be the jumping off point to plan parental interventions to modify some of the likely situations in the only child family. Once parents recognize certain relationships or situational areas that are likely to be difficult or to lead to less than desirable child traits, they can work on ways to avert these, and to "normalize" their offspring's family situation. Comfort with such interventions should do a great deal to combat the mystique of the stereotypes.

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